

From administration to transformation: The new role of managers in higher education

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Accepted 26 September, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study explored the evolving role of university managers in higher education, focusing on their transition from traditional administrative functions to transformational leadership roles. Employing a qualitative case study approach at Gulu University, Uganda, the research examined managers' adaptations during their engagement with the TESCEA (Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa) project. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, revealing that managers increasingly acted as facilitators, change agents, and advocates for gender equity and employability reforms. Despite these positive developments, they encountered challenges such as resource limitations, bureaucratic resistance, and insufficient leadership training. Managers adopted strategies including collaborative governance, capacity building, and policy integration to sustain reforms. The findings highlight the critical need for targeted leadership development, institutional policy reform, and cultural shifts toward participatory governance in African universities. The study contributed empirical insights into the expanding and transformative roles of university managers within resource-constrained and complex socio-political contexts.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, higher education, curriculum reform.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the role of university managers in African higher education has evolved beyond routine administrative functions to encompass leadership for institutional transformation. This shift has been driven by increasing demands for universities to become more responsive to societal needs, inclusive in governance, and innovative in teaching and learning (Turyahikayo, Mugizi and Kasule, 2024a). While the rhetoric of change is widely embraced, the practical realities of enacting transformational leadership in resource-constrained and historically rigid institutions remain underexplored, particularly at the managerial level.

Emerging research indicates that African universities are progressively engaging in reform initiatives such as curriculum co-creation, gender mainstreaming, and pedagogical renewal. These initiatives require leadership that is strategic, participatory, and values-driven, rather than hierarchical and compliance-oriented (Abebe, Owino and Nambalirwa, 2023; Mngomezulu and Miti, 2024). However, institutional leadership structures often lag behind these expectations. Evidence from Uganda and neighboring countries reveals that while university managers are increasingly expected to act as agents of change, many remain embedded in legacy systems that

constrain their capacity to lead adaptively (Turyahikayo et al., 2024b; Makerere University, 2023).

Despite growing scholarly interest in transformational leadership within African higher education, there is limited empirical research examining how these leadership models are operationalized at the institutional level. Much of the existing literature is normative or policy-focused, offering minimal insight into how mid- and senior-level managers in public universities navigate the complexities of reform implementation (EANSO, 2024; British Council, 2025). Furthermore, few studies investigate these dynamics in post-conflict or underserved regions, where institutional challenges are often compounded by historical marginalization, disruption, and chronic resource scarcity (UNESCO-IESALC, 2023).

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on Gulu University in Northern Uganda—a public institution actively engaged in reform through its participation in the Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) project. The university's adoption of collaborative curriculum development, gender-responsive pedagogy, and inclusive leadership practices has created new demands on managers to extend their roles beyond traditional mandates. By exploring how managers at Gulu University have responded to these challenges, this study offers original insights into the micro-level enactment of transformational leadership within a context of institutional transition.

The findings contribute to contemporary debates on institutional change, leadership agility, and inclusive governance in higher education. In doing so, the study highlights the tensions between reform imperatives and structural constraints and underscores the importance of contextually grounded leadership approaches for fostering sustainable transformation.

Statement of the problem

Higher education institutions across face an urgent need to transform their leadership paradigms to respond effectively to contemporary challenges such as globalization, social equity, and employability. Ideally, university managers should act as dynamic leaders who inspire innovation, foster inclusive governance, and drive curriculum reforms to prepare graduates for the complexities of the 21st century. In reality, however, many managers remain entrenched in traditional administrative roles, bound by bureaucratic procedures, resource constraints, and hierarchical cultures that stifle innovation and inclusivity (Materu, 2007; De Boer et al., 2010). This disconnect hinders universities' ability to enact meaningful reforms and respond to evolving societal needs. At Gulu University, a TESCEA partner institution, efforts to integrate gender mainstreaming and employability into curricula have revealed both the potential and the

limitations of managerial roles in driving transformation. While projects like TESCEA provide frameworks and resources to support change, the day-to-day realities of managerial practices, challenges, and leadership styles remain underexplored. Without a thorough assessment of how managers negotiate these roles, institutional reforms risk being superficial or unsustainable. This study attempted to address this gap by examining how university managers at Gulu University have adapted to new leadership demands within a complex, resource-limited environment.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the evolving role of university managers as they transition from traditional administrative functions to transformational leadership. The study sought to assess the challenges these managers face, the strategies they employ to navigate institutional change, and the implications for policy and leadership development in higher education institutions.

Significance of the study

This study offers valuable insights into the under-researched area of university managerial leadership in African higher education. Its findings will:

- Inform institutional leaders and policymakers about the evolving leadership needs of managers to support effective curriculum reform and gender mainstreaming.
- Provide evidence to support the design of targeted leadership development programs aimed at enhancing managerial capacity for transformational leadership.
- Contribute to the academic literature on higher education management by foregrounding the lived experiences of managers in a. post-conflict and resource-constrained setting.
- Offer practical recommendations for donor agencies and reform initiatives like TESCEA on how to better support sustainable institutional change through managerial empowerment.

Research objective

To explore and assess the evolving roles, challenges, and strategies of university managers.

Research question

How have university managers adapted to their evolving leadership roles, and what challenges and strategies characterize this transformation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional roles of university managers

Historically, university managers in higher education have been primarily associated with operational and administrative responsibilities. These include oversight of finances, human resources, compliance with regulations, infrastructure management, and logistical support (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2012; Bush, 2011). In many Sub-Saharan African universities, these roles have been inherited from colonial administrative systems that emphasized top-down, hierarchical governance models (Materu, 2007). As such, university managers have often functioned as implementers of policy rather than shapers of institutional vision or drivers of academic transformation.

Scholars argue that these roles are deeply entrenched in a bureaucratic culture that separates academic leadership from administrative functions (De Boer, Enders and Schimank, 2010). This division has limited the potential of managers to engage meaningfully in curriculum design, research innovation, or inclusive governance. Furthermore, appointments to managerial roles have traditionally been based on seniority or tenure rather than competencies in leadership, strategic planning, or change management (Bryman, 2007). As a result, many institutions lack a cadre of professionally trained managers equipped to lead reform in dynamic and resource-constrained environments.

While substantial literature documents the traditional roles of university managers, there is limited empirical research on how these roles are evolving, particularly in response to externally funded reform initiatives or local policy shifts. In the Ugandan context, most studies focus on academic leadership or governance reforms (Turyahikayo, Mugizi and Kasule, 2024a), leaving a gap in understanding how middle and senior managers navigate institutional change, especially in post-conflict or underserved regions like Northern Uganda. There is also a lack of research on how such managers negotiate the balance between administrative obligations and transformative leadership.

Transformational leadership in higher education

Transformational leadership has gained increasing relevance in higher education discourse, particularly as institutions face the dual pressures of globalization and local demands for equity and relevance. This model of leadership prioritizes shared vision, innovation, staff empowerment, and collaborative problem-solving (Northouse, 2021; Day et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). In higher education, transformational leaders are seen as agents of change who foster inclusive pedagogies, support curriculum innovation, and cultivate institutional cultures

of accountability and engagement (Middlehurst, 2008).

Transformational leadership is further characterized by three core dimensions: intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and participatory decision-making. Intellectual stimulation involves encouraging staff and faculty to question assumptions, think critically, and generate new ideas and solutions. Individualized consideration reflects the leader's commitment to mentoring and addressing the unique developmental needs of each team member. Participatory decision-making emphasizes inclusive engagement, allowing stakeholders to contribute meaningfully to key institutional decisions. These dimensions enable leaders to foster environments that are innovative, inclusive, and responsive to change (Bass and Riggio, 2006).

In the African context, transformational leadership has been linked to enhanced academic staff performance, student engagement, and institutional resilience (Kasule, Turyahikayo and Mugizi, 2025). However, its implementation faces several contextual challenges. These include deeply embedded hierarchical norms, resistance to change from senior faculty, limited autonomy for middle managers, and chronic resource shortages (Langa, 2013; Turyahikayo et al., 2024b). Additionally, many African universities lack formal leadership development programs, leaving emerging leaders without the necessary training to implement transformational practices effectively.

Although there is growing literature on transformational leadership in African universities, much of it focuses on Vice-Chancellors, Deans, and academic leadership (Bryman, 2007; Kasule et al., 2025). There is insufficient attention to the middle-tier managerial level, such as heads of departments, registrars, and directors of units, who often serve as the bridge between institutional strategy and implementation. Also lacking are studies that examine how these individuals enact leadership in cross-functional areas like gender mainstreaming, employability, or curriculum reform. More research is needed to explore how university managers develop or are constrained in adopting transformational leadership styles in institutional contexts that remain bureaucratic and resistant to change.

The TESCEA project

The Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) project provides an important case study for understanding how higher education reform can shift managerial roles. The project, funded by the UK FCDO and implemented by INASP in collaboration with universities in Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, aimed to integrate critical thinking, gender equity, and employability skills into university curricula through a participatory approach (Openjuru et al., 2020). Unlike many donor-driven interventions, TESCEA emphasized institutional

ownership, co-creation of curricula, and long-term capacity building.

University managers played central roles in facilitating and sustaining TESCEA activities. These included leading curriculum co-design workshops, embedding reform principles into strategic plans, and advocating for gender-responsive practices within administrative and academic processes. This represented a marked departure from their traditional functions. It also created new expectations for them to serve as facilitators, negotiators, and institutional change agents rather than gatekeepers or enforcers of compliance.

Despite the transformative potential of TESCEA, there is a paucity of scholarly work analyzing how managers within participating institutions adapted to these new roles. Much of the existing documentation is in the form of program reports or policy briefs rather than peer-reviewed studies (Openjuru et al., 2020). Furthermore, the lived experiences of managers, particularly how they navigated power dynamics, institutional resistance, and limited training, remain underexplored. No known studies have comprehensively examined how TESCEA reshaped managerial roles at Gulu University or similar institutions in post-conflict regions, despite the rich insights such cases could offer on institutional transformation in low-resource settings.

Across all sub-sections of the literature review, three overarching gaps are evident:

Role transition: There is limited research on how university managers transition from traditional administrative roles to transformational leadership positions in African contexts, particularly under externally funded reform initiatives.

Managerial experiences: Empirical studies exploring the lived experiences of managers as they navigate change, including their motivations, challenges, and leadership practices, are scarce.

Institutional context: Research is lacking on how contextual factors (e.g., organizational culture, post-conflict realities, and resource constraints) shape or constrain managerial leadership in Sub-Saharan African universities.

This study aims to address these gaps by investigating how university managers at Gulu University, a TESCEA partner institution, have evolved in their roles, what challenges they face, and what strategies they use to implement and sustain transformational reforms.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

A qualitative case study design was adopted to explore the

lived experiences and evolving roles of university managers at Gulu University. This approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of complex institutional dynamics within their real-world context, particularly regarding leadership transformations associated with the TESCEA project (Yin, 2018). The case study method allowed for a comprehensive examination of how university managers navigate and influence change processes in a resource-constrained and post-conflict environment.

Participants

Twelve participants were purposively selected based on their leadership roles and involvement in TESCEA activities. The sample included six university managers, comprising deans, directors, and department heads; four academic staff members engaged in curriculum co-design; and two TESCEA project coordinators. This purposive sampling ensured that the study captured diverse perspectives from individuals directly involved in driving and managing institutional reforms.

Data collection

Data collection combined multiple methods to ensure triangulation and depth of understanding. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with all twelve participants, allowing them to share detailed accounts of their experiences and perceptions regarding leadership changes. Additionally, two focus group discussions were held, each with five participants, to facilitate collective reflection on institutional support mechanisms, challenges, and resistance to reform. Document analysis complemented these qualitative data, encompassing a total of fifteen documents, including TESCEA project reports, university strategic plans (covering 2015–2025), internal memos related to curriculum and gender mainstreaming, faculty implementation reports, gender policy documents, and the university's quality assurance framework. Analyzing these documents helped contextualize participant narratives and validate the reported institutional changes.

Data analysis

Data were managed and analyzed thematically using NVivo software, which allowed for efficient organization, systematic coding, and identification of patterns across the dataset. The analysis focused on three key themes: the evolving roles of university managers, the challenges they faced in implementing reforms, and the strategies they employed to sustain institutional transformation. To ensure

rigor, analytic memos and reflective journaling were used throughout the process to maintain transparency and a clear audit trail (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013; Zamawe, 2015).

Ethical considerations and participant protection

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Several measures were taken to protect participant confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's objectives, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any point. Identifying information such as names, job titles, and departments was pseudonymized or removed in transcripts and reports. Data were stored securely on encrypted devices accessible only to the research team. Focus group participants signed confidentiality agreements and were reminded to respect privacy beyond the sessions. Additionally, all identifiable information within institutional documents was anonymized during analysis. These steps ensured adherence to ethical standards and safeguarded participants' privacy throughout the study.

FINDINGS

This section presents the key empirical findings from the study, organized around six major themes that emerged from the data. These themes provide a comprehensive understanding of how university managers at Gulu University have experienced evolving roles, navigated challenges, and employed strategies to sustain institutional reforms. The findings offer rich insights into managers' perceptions and lived experiences, supported by representative participant quotations.

Evolving managerial roles

This examines the transformation in managerial roles resulting from institutional reforms, focusing on the transition from traditional administrative functions to strategic leadership responsibilities. It highlights managers' expanded scope of influence and increased engagement in decision-making processes.

Shift from administrative to strategic leadership

Participants consistently described a significant shift away from routine administrative tasks toward more strategic and visionary roles. Many managers reported that their responsibilities now include active participation in institutional planning, policy formulation, and leading

reform initiatives. This transformation marks a departure from the historically bureaucratic, compliance-driven managerial role toward a model of leadership that emphasizes strategic thinking, innovation, and institutional change.

For example, one manager reflected, "Before TESCEA, my role was mainly administrative. Now, I participate in strategic planning and help guide reforms that affect the whole university." This shift indicates growing recognition of managers as key agents of change rather than mere enforcers of rules.

Expanded influence beyond routine management

Beyond the internal administrative domain, managers highlighted their increased involvement in academic and external community engagement. Their roles have expanded to include influencing academic policies, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and liaising with external stakeholders such as employers and development partners. This broader engagement challenges traditional hierarchical divisions between administrative and academic functions and signals a more integrated leadership approach that supports institutional responsiveness to societal needs.

As one participant noted, "I found myself influencing academic policies and interacting more directly with students and external partners than ever before." Such engagement demonstrates the evolving nature of university management toward inclusivity and strategic partnership-building.

Managerial involvement in curriculum development

This explores the nature and extent of university managers' involvement in curriculum reform, focusing on their facilitative and coordination roles in the curriculum co-design process.

Managerial engagement in curriculum development

Managers reported that their involvement in curriculum development has expanded significantly through initiatives like TESCEA. Rather than limiting their roles to administrative oversight, they actively participate in planning, organizing, and monitoring curriculum review and design processes. They often serve as facilitators who bridge communication between academic departments and ensure alignment with institutional goals such as employability and inclusivity.

One participant shared, "I was responsible for organizing curriculum meetings and ensuring input from various faculties was integrated." This highlights the critical

coordinating role managers play in advancing curriculum innovation.

Facilitating collaborative curriculum workshops

Participants emphasized the importance of fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including academic staff, students, and external partners. Managers described organizing and leading workshops that created spaces for dialogue, negotiation, and shared ownership of curriculum reforms. This participatory approach not only enriched the curriculum content but also mitigated resistance by involving key actors in decision-making.

As one manager explained, "Bringing together lecturers, students, and employers helped us create relevant and inclusive courses." Such facilitation underpins a shift toward more democratic and responsive curriculum governance.

Gender mainstreaming and advocacy

This examines managers' perceptions and actions regarding gender equity initiatives, exploring both their advocacy roles and the challenges encountered in promoting gender-sensitive policies and practices.

Advocacy for gender equity

Managers took on active roles in championing gender mainstreaming, advocating for the integration of gender-sensitive pedagogy and policies into institutional frameworks. They emphasized that gender equity efforts went beyond compliance with donor requirements, representing a transformative agenda to reshape institutional culture and teaching practices. This advocacy involved raising awareness, facilitating training, and influencing policy revisions.

One participant stated, "We pushed for gender to be integrated into teaching and policy. It was about changing mindsets, not just numbers." This reflects a deep commitment to embedding gender equity as a core institutional value.

Navigating resistance to gender mainstreaming

Despite their efforts, managers reported encountering significant resistance rooted in entrenched gender biases and skepticism about the relevance of gender issues. Some colleagues dismissed gender mainstreaming as irrelevant or an externally imposed agenda, creating challenges in building consensus and implementing reforms.

A manager recounted, "Some male colleagues dismissed gender mainstreaming as irrelevant, calling it a donor agenda." Overcoming such resistance required patience, continuous dialogue, and strategic framing to gradually foster acceptance and cultural change.

Challenges faced by managers

This identifies the key obstacles that university managers face while driving reforms, focusing on resource limitations, institutional resistance, and capacity gaps.

Resource constraints

Limited financial and human resources emerged as a critical barrier to effective reform implementation. Managers reported challenges in securing funding for workshops, trainings, and other activities essential for sustaining reforms. Additionally, heavy teaching loads and staff shortages constrained participation and slowed progress.

One participant noted, "We often lacked funds for workshops or had difficulty freeing staff due to heavy workloads." Such constraints underline the structural challenges that limit the scope and sustainability of institutional change.

Bureaucratic and academic resistance

Resistance from academic staff, particularly regarding expanded managerial roles in academic decision-making, presented another significant challenge. Some faculty members perceived managerial involvement as interference in academic matters, which strained collaboration and hindered reform efforts.

A participant explained, "Some lecturers saw our role in curriculum development as interference, making collaboration difficult." This highlights persistent divisions and cultural barriers within university governance structures.

Lack of leadership training

Many managers shared that their appointments were based on seniority or administrative experience rather than formal leadership training. This lack of preparation made it difficult for them to navigate complex reform processes and exercise transformational leadership effectively.

One manager reflected, "TESCEA was my first real leadership training. Before that, I learned on the job, which was challenging." This points to a critical gap in leadership development within African higher education institutions.

Strategies for sustaining institutional reforms

This question explores the approaches and tactics employed by university managers to embed reforms and ensure their longevity within the institutional context.

Collaborative governance and stakeholder engagement

Managers emphasized the importance of involving a broad range of stakeholders, including faculty, students, and external partners, in reform processes. This inclusive approach helped build shared ownership, reduce resistance, and foster collective responsibility for sustaining change.

One participant stated, "Including diverse stakeholders in planning helped reduce resistance and build commitment." Collaborative governance thus emerged as a key strategy for institutionalizing reforms.

Capacity building and training

Ongoing training and professional development were critical components in sustaining reforms. Managers credited workshops on gender equity, pedagogical innovation, and leadership skills with shifting mindsets and improving practice across the institution.

As one manager put it, "Workshops helped shift mindsets, and trained managers became mentors to others." This capacity-building created a ripple effect that extended reform impact beyond initial project boundaries.

Strategic integration of reforms

Embedding reform goals into formal institutional policies, quality assurance frameworks, and strategic plans was a deliberate strategy to ensure continuity and resilience of changes.

A manager explained, "We integrated gender and employability into the university's strategic plan to institutionalize these priorities." This strategic alignment fortified the reforms against institutional inertia.

Communication and advocacy

Maintaining visibility and actively advocating for reforms with senior leadership and governance bodies was essential for sustaining momentum. Managers described regularly updating university leadership and using formal communication channels to reinforce the importance of reforms.

"We regularly updated leadership and advocated for

reforms to keep them on the agenda," shared one participant. This proactive advocacy helped secure ongoing institutional support.

DISCUSSION

This section critically interprets the key findings of the study in relation to existing literature and relevant theoretical frameworks, with a particular focus on transformational and distributed leadership paradigms. It examines how the evolving roles of university managers at Gulu University reflect or depart from broader trends in higher education leadership, particularly within African post-conflict and resource-constrained contexts. The discussion is anchored in recent scholarship and considers the implications of these findings for institutional transformation, leadership development, and policy implementation. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about the role of leadership in driving substantive reform and adaptive governance in African public universities.

Evolving managerial roles

The shift from traditional administrative duties to strategic leadership roles among university managers at Gulu University aligns with global trends in higher education. Recent studies emphasize that effective leadership in universities now requires a balance between administrative efficiency and strategic foresight. For instance, a 2025 study highlights that educational managers must possess essential skills to navigate rapid changes in the educational landscape. This transformation is not merely a structural change but reflects a deeper cultural shift towards recognizing managers as pivotal agents of institutional transformation.

However, this evolution presents challenges. Managers often face resistance from faculty members who are accustomed to traditional hierarchies and may perceive managerial involvement in academic matters as encroachment. Overcoming this resistance requires fostering a culture of collaboration and mutual respect between administrative and academic staff.

Managerial engagement in curriculum development

The active involvement of university managers in curriculum development is crucial for aligning academic programs with institutional goals and societal needs. A 2025 study underscores the importance of educational managers in adapting curricula to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. At Gulu University, managers have played a significant role in facilitating curriculum reforms,

ensuring that programs are relevant, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of students and the community.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Resistance from faculty members, who may feel their academic autonomy is threatened, can hinder the implementation of curriculum changes. Additionally, limited resources and training opportunities for managers can impede their ability to effectively lead curriculum development processes.

Gender mainstreaming efforts

Gender mainstreaming in higher education is essential for creating inclusive and equitable learning environments. Recent reports indicate that while progress has been made in promoting gender equality in education access, disparities persist, particularly in leadership positions. At Gulu University, managers have been instrumental in advocating for gender-sensitive policies and practices, aiming to address these disparities.

However, the implementation of gender mainstreaming initiatives faces several challenges. Resistance from staff members who hold traditional gender norms, a lack of awareness about gender issues, and insufficient resources for training and support can impede progress. Overcoming these barriers requires sustained efforts, including awareness campaigns, capacity-building programs, and the establishment of supportive policies and structures.

Challenges: Resource constraints and resistance

Resource constraints and resistance to change are significant challenges faced by university managers in implementing institutional reforms. A 2024 study discusses the complexities of higher education leadership in the digital era, highlighting the need for leaders to navigate challenges such as resource limitations and institutional resistance. At Gulu University, managers have reported difficulties in securing adequate funding for reform initiatives and have encountered resistance from staff members who are reluctant to adopt new practices.

Addressing these challenges requires strategic planning, effective communication, and the development of a supportive organizational culture. Building consensus among stakeholders, securing external funding, and providing training and support can help mitigate resource constraints and reduce resistance to change.

Strategies to sustain institutional reforms

Sustaining institutional reforms necessitates the adoption of strategies that promote long-term commitment and continuous improvement. Recent literature emphasizes

the importance of transformational leadership, knowledge management, and stakeholder engagement in achieving sustainable performance in higher education institutions. At Gulu University, managers have employed various strategies, including capacity-building programs, stakeholder engagement, and the integration of reforms into institutional policies and practices.

Despite these efforts, sustaining reforms remains challenging. Factors such as turnover of key personnel, changing political landscapes, and shifting priorities can undermine the continuity of reform initiatives. To enhance sustainability, it is essential to institutionalize reforms through policy integration, foster a culture of continuous improvement, and ensure that reforms are adaptable to changing circumstances.

The findings from Gulu University reflect broader trends in higher education management, highlighting the evolving roles of university managers, the importance of curriculum development, the challenges of gender mainstreaming, and the strategies required to overcome resource constraints and resistance. By addressing these challenges and implementing effective strategies, universities can enhance their capacity to adapt to changing educational landscapes and contribute to the development of inclusive and equitable societies.

Conclusions

The study found that university managers at Gulu University are increasingly aware of the need to shift from routine administrative roles toward more strategic and transformational leadership. Many managers recognized their roles as facilitators of change, particularly in areas such as curriculum co-creation, inclusive pedagogy, and gender mainstreaming. However, interpretations of these roles varied significantly across departments, often influenced by managerial experience, training, and exposure to reform initiatives like TESCEA.

The findings indicate a partial and uneven implementation of transformational leadership practices. While some managers demonstrated key attributes of transformational leadership, such as inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, others remained embedded in hierarchical and compliance-driven practices. The degree of implementation was strongly influenced by institutional culture, leadership support, and professional development opportunities.

The study revealed several structural and contextual challenges that hinder the effective enactment of transformational leadership. These include limited financial and human resources, centralized decision-making, rigid bureaucratic structures, and a legacy of post-conflict trauma. Additionally, the lack of institutionalized leadership training and mentoring programs further

constrained the ability of managers to act as adaptive and visionary leaders.

The study found that the TESCEA project played a catalytic role in promoting reform-oriented thinking and practice among university managers. Managers involved in TESCEA initiatives showed greater openness to participatory approaches and innovation in curriculum and pedagogy. However, institutional uptake remained limited in some areas due to misalignment between project goals and existing university structures. While the project inspired change, its long-term sustainability and integration into mainstream practices remain a concern.

The study concludes that effective managerial leadership is critical to sustaining institutional transformation. Where managers embraced transformational leadership, there was greater progress toward inclusive governance, improved staff engagement, and alignment with reform goals. Conversely, in units where leadership remained transactional or passive, reform outcomes were limited. Therefore, the capacity, mindset, and support systems for managerial leadership play a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of institutional transformation.

Implications

This study's findings have several significant implications for leadership theory, the development of new theoretical frameworks, the existing body of knowledge, and future research directions in African higher education leadership—especially within post-conflict and resource-constrained contexts.

Implications for existing theory

The findings reaffirm the relevance of transformational leadership theory in African higher education but also highlight its limitations when applied in rigid, under-resourced, and post-conflict institutional environments. As noted by Turyahikayo, Mugizi, and Kasule (2024b), transformational leadership must be interpreted through the lens of local institutional realities rather than applied as a universal model. Managers at Gulu University exhibited varying degrees of transformational practice, suggesting that existing theory requires contextual adaptation to remain applicable in African settings.

Implications for new theoretical development

The study supports the need to develop context-sensitive leadership frameworks that incorporate elements of transformational, distributed, and adaptive leadership models. Recent scholarship emphasizes that African

universities require leadership approaches that are participatory, values-driven, and responsive to institutional constraints (Puplambu et al., 2022; Mngomezulu and Miti, 2024). This research proposes that future theoretical work explore hybrid leadership models tailored for reform in resource-constrained and historically marginalized institutions, particularly in post-conflict regions like Northern Uganda.

Implications for the existing body of knowledge

This study contributes to the growing body of empirical research on managerial leadership in African universities by shedding light on micro-level leadership practices during institutional transformation. Unlike prior policy-centric studies, this research offers insight into how managers navigate reform on the ground, including their engagement with participatory curriculum design and gender mainstreaming (Turyahikayo et al., 2024a; Abebe, Owino and Nambalirwa, 2023). These findings help bridge the gap between theoretical models of leadership and the operational realities within African public universities, adding depth to current understandings of institutional change dynamics.

Implications for future research and new research areas

This study opens up several critical avenues for future research: Cross-institutional comparative studies across different regions of Africa to assess how leadership responses vary under similar reform pressures. Longitudinal research to evaluate how managers' leadership capacities evolve through sustained engagement in reform initiatives like TESCEA (Openjuru et al., 2020). Investigations into gender and leadership, focusing on how gender mainstreaming is internalized by male and female leaders at different management levels (Abebe et al., 2023). Examination of leadership sustainability beyond donor-funded projects, particularly the institutionalization of reform practices post-intervention (British Council, 2025).

As higher education institutions continue to grapple with change, particularly in underserved regions, research must evolve to address the interplay between leadership practice, institutional structure, and the broader socio-political context (UNESCO-IESALC, 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and implications of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to support effective managerial leadership and sustainable

institutional transformation in African higher education, particularly within public universities operating in resource-constrained and post-conflict contexts:

Enhance leadership development programs

Universities should invest in structured and context-specific leadership development programs aimed at building the transformational leadership capacities of mid- and senior-level managers. These programs should emphasize strategic thinking, change management, participatory leadership, and gender-responsive governance, as highlighted in recent literature (Turyahikayo, Mugizi and Kasule, 2024a; Mngomezulu and Miti, 2024).

Increase resource allocation and managerial autonomy

Institutions must secure dedicated funding for innovation and leadership development while granting managers greater autonomy over resource use. Empowering managers to make timely and strategic decisions can reduce bureaucratic inertia and improve reform implementation outcomes (British Council, 2025).

Promote inclusive governance structures

To build institutional ownership and reduce resistance to change, universities should adopt participatory governance models that engage academic staff, students, and external stakeholders. Inclusive leadership practices have been shown to strengthen reform outcomes and increase stakeholder accountability (Puplampu et al., 2022; Abebe, Owino and Nambalirwa, 2023).

Mainstream gender equity in policy and practice

Universities should continue to embed gender equity into institutional policies, curriculum development, and pedagogical practice. Targeted training, gender audits, and institutional advocacy are essential to shifting deeply embedded norms and creating equitable learning and working environments (Abebe et al., 2023; Turyahikayo et al., 2024b).

Strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

Robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems should be developed to track the implementation and outcomes of reform initiatives. These systems will allow for evidence-

based adjustments and sustained reform momentum over time (UNESCO-IESALC, 2023).

Encourage cross-institutional collaboration

African universities should actively pursue inter-institutional partnerships and communities of practice to exchange leadership strategies, share reform experiences, and scale successful innovations. Collaborative learning fosters peer accountability and accelerates institutional capacity building (Openjuru et al., 2020; British Council, 2025).

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Citation: Lamaro, G., Ndyomugenyi, E. K., & Openjuru, G. L. (2025). From administration to transformation: The new role of managers in higher education. *African Educational Research Journal*, 13(4), 461-471.
